

Mental health and Covid-19 in Wales

Addressing the wider determinants of poor mental health after the pandemic



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Mental health in the aftermath of the pandemic

There are signs that the Coronavirus crisis could be driving a worrying rise in poor mental health.¹ In Wales, **two-thirds (67%) of people** say the outbreak has had a negative effect on their wellbeing. However, those who have been affected by job losses or who are in financial difficulty are particularly likely to have been affected, with a large proportion feeling worried about money and concerned about the future.

The problems that people face during economic downturns tend to have an adverse impact on mental health. At the same time, mental health problems can make it more difficult to cope with issues associated with economic downturns. We are already seeing the disproportionate impact on people experiencing mental health problems, who are **twice as likely to have fallen behind on household bills** since the Coronavirus outbreak.

What is the problem?

Without a significant policy response to safeguard and support mental health, this crisis is likely to cast a long shadow for those who have been affected by the economic downturn. At the moment, not everyone is able to get the support they need.

Half of people experiencing mental ill-health in Wales said they would have found information or advice on issues like work, money or benefits useful when contacting health services. Despite this:

- **Only 48%** said they were offered this type of advice
- **Only 16%** were referred to a service that could help them

What needs to happen?

To address the after effects of the pandemic, the next Welsh Government will need to tackle the wider determinants of poor mental health that have arisen as a result of the crisis. It must:

- **Tackle the negative mental health impact of the Coronavirus crisis** by investing in programmes to provide holistic support for those facing long periods of unemployment.
- **Make it easier for people experiencing mental health difficulties to get support** by ensuring practical advice is integrated into healthcare and social services.

The pandemic is taking a toll on people's wellbeing

Most people in Wales have experienced negative thoughts or emotions during this time.

Two-thirds (67%) of adults in Wales say the Coronavirus outbreak has had a negative effect on their wellbeing.

The impacts most commonly reported by people are:

- Feeling stressed or anxious (43%)
- Feeling worried about the future (40%)
- Feeling lonely (25%).

People who were made redundant or lost work during the pandemic have been badly affected.

Our research found 9 in 10 (92%) people who have lost a job since the outbreak began said their wellbeing had been affected by the crisis.

Two-thirds (65%) reported being worried about money, while a third (33%) said the pandemic had put a strain on their personal relationships.

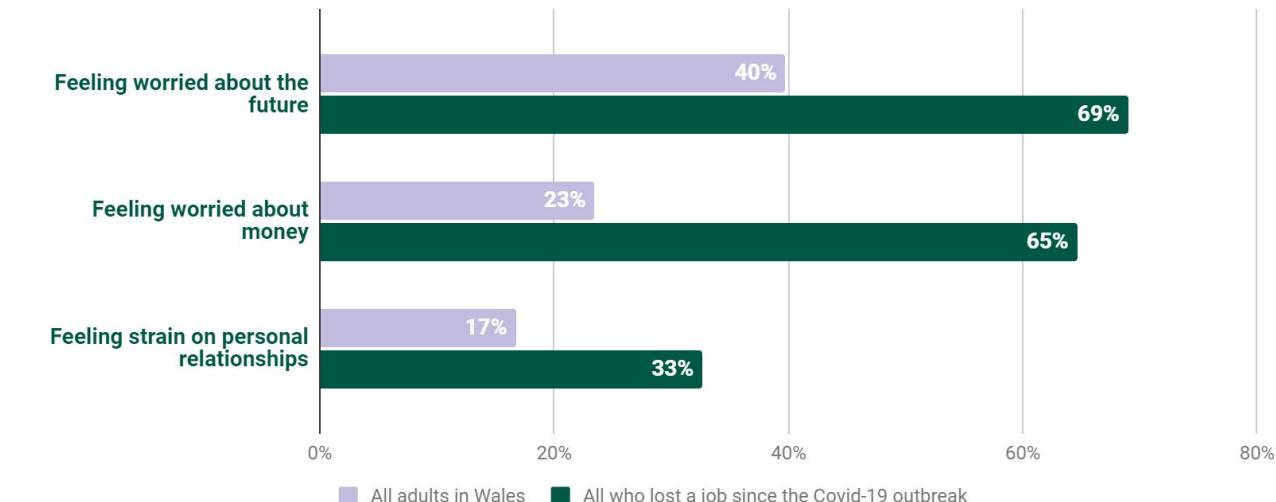
People who do not have a financial buffer to help them weather the crisis are also more likely to be affected.

The proportion of people reporting a negative impact on wellbeing was

27% higher amongst people who said they would struggle to cover their costs for more than a week if they lost their main source of income.

Lower levels of wellbeing can mean we are less emotionally resilient and make it more difficult for us to deal with day to day problems.

People who lost work as a result of the pandemic are particularly affected



Those affected by the economic downturn are particularly at risk

Without a significant policy response to safeguard and support mental health, this crisis is likely to cast a long shadow for those who have lost jobs or been pulled into financial difficulty.

The problems that people face during economic downturns tend to have an adverse impact on mental health.

We often see a higher prevalence of mental health problems during times of high unemployment.² Periods of financial difficulty contribute to mental distress, both because of increased stress or worry associated with money and debt problems, and more indirectly by limiting the options that people have to take part in activities which support good mental health.³

Those going through adverse experiences - like losing a job or falling into problem debt - are also at increased risk of severe mental health problems and suicidal behaviour.⁴

Mental health problems can make it more difficult to cope with issues associated with economic downturns.

Problems stemming from a loss of income or changes at work can feel insurmountable when you are also experiencing mental ill-health. But unless they are addressed, they can lead to more severe financial difficulties which exacerbate or prolong mental health difficulties.

This is particularly true for those who do not have a financial safety net, who are at a higher risk of being pulled into problem debt or being left without enough to get by.⁵

People with mental health problems are twice as likely to have fallen behind on household bills since the Coronavirus outbreak

A vicious cycle?

People in Wales who are experiencing mental health problems risk being caught in a vicious cycle of poor mental health and financial problems.

Amongst people who report having a mental health condition:



Nearly half (45%) are worried about money



1 in 4 (25%) don't feel they have anyone to talk to about their worries



1 in 5 (23%) have fallen behind on one or more household bills

Not everyone is able to get the support they need

People experiencing mental health problems need to have timely access to support and treatment through health services in Wales. But wider support is also needed in order to help overcome the practical and financial problems which contribute to poor mental wellbeing during an economic downturn.

Not everyone in Wales who wants this type of support is being offered it when they contact health services. For those who were offered help, the most

common type provided was information like a leaflet or a website address. Whilst this is a positive step, contacting agencies for help can be difficult or daunting for someone with depression or anxiety.

Referrals can prevent people dropping off at this point, by sharing information with another agency or arranging an appointment so the person can be provided with appropriate support. However, only a small proportion are offered a formal referral.

Half of people experiencing mental ill-health said they would have found information or advice on issues like work, money or benefits useful when contacting health services. But of these...



Only 48% said they were offered this type of advice



Only 16% were referred to a service that could help them

Pressure on health services

The demand for practical support puts additional pressure on already stretched health services in Wales.

In 2018, a survey of mental health practitioners carried out by Citizens Advice in association with the Royal College of Psychiatrists found⁶:

- **9 out of 10 practitioners** said people raise practical problems at mental health appointments
- **Half of practitioners** felt they were spending more time dealing with non-health issues as part of appointments than the previous year
- **9 out of 10 practitioners** said practical problems lead to clients being unable to manage their mental health.



What needs to change?

Whilst the full scale of the economic impact of the Coronavirus pandemic is still uncertain, there is a real risk that one of its after effects will be higher rates of poor mental health.

It is crucial that people in Wales who are experiencing mental health problems have timely access to treatment offered through health services. But promoting good mental health and protecting against the worst impacts of the crisis cannot be achieved through healthcare alone.

Many of the factors which contribute to poor mental health sit outside the traditional remit of health services. These include issues to do with income, debt and employment which are likely to become more prevalent in the wake of the pandemic.

In order to address the after effects of the pandemic, the next Welsh Government will need to tackle the wider determinants of poor mental health that have arisen as a result of the crisis. It must:

1. **Tackle the negative mental health impact of the Coronavirus crisis** by investing in programmes to provide holistic support for those facing long periods of unemployment.
2. **Make it easier for people experiencing mental health difficulties to get support** by ensuring practical advice is integrated into healthcare and social services.

Cerys' story

Cerys is a single parent who works part-time and cares for her son, who has mental health problems. Cerys was dealing with a number of debt and benefit issues, and her financial difficulties were having a negative impact on her mental health.

A Citizens Advice adviser helped Cerys to apply for Personal Independence Payment (PIP), and supported her son with an Employment Support Allowance (ESA) claim. Her adviser also completed a debt assessment, advised on her options going forward and referred her to our debt contact centre.

As a result of this support, Cerys was able to increase her income by around £120 a week and her son was awarded an additional £65.85 through the Severe Disability Premium, as well as having his requirement to seek work removed in recognition of the impact of his disability.

References

1. The Lancet, [Mental health before and during the COVID-19 pandemic: a longitudinal probability sample survey of the UK population](#), July 2020
2. BMJ, [Mental health outcomes in times of economic recession: a systematic literature review](#), February 2016
3. Money and Mental Health Policy Institute, [Money on your mind](#), June 2016
4. Samaritans, [Dying from inequality](#), 2017
5. Citizens Advice Cymru, [Facing the cliff edge](#), May 2020
6. Citizens Advice Cymru, [How advice on debt and housing helps people manage mental health](#), Aug 2018

Methodology

Data in this report are taken from two separate online surveys.

Figures on page 2 and 3 were taken from a survey carried out by YouGov between 22nd October - 2nd November 2020. Total sample size was 2086 adults. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all Welsh adults (aged 18+).

Figures on page 4 were taken from a survey carried out by YouGov between 27th February - 2nd March 2020. Total sample size was 1002 adults. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all Welsh adults (aged 18+).

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